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SUBJECT: JAVAKHETI: AN ARMENIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Classified By: CDA A. F. Godfrey for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Georgia,s predominantly Armenian Samstkhe-Javakheti (S-J) region periodically makes news in Armenia, colored by the local perception here that Georgians treat their Armenian minority shabbily. Armenian government officials have not generally complained on this theme, but others, including the governing-coalition Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) "Dashnaktsutyun" party, bemoan what they view as Georgian neglect of the impoverished and isolated community. Working together, Yerevan and Tbilisi poloffs recently interviewed the ARF, an Armenian-based Javakheti advocacy group, and local analysts to assess the issue from a Yerevan perspective. END SUMMARY.

RUN-OF-THE-MILL POVERTY OR POLITICAL NEGLECT?

12. (C) Though our interlocutors assigned varying degrees of blame to the Georgian government for the socio-economic problems that plague S-J, none let the GOG completely off the hook. Giro Manoyan, a member of the nationalist ARF's party secretariat (or "Buro") said that while the Armenian

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community,s situation has improved under President Saakashvili, conditions in S-J remain worse than that of other poor, but ethnically Georgian, regions. He stopped short of accusing the Georgians of politically motivated neglect, and noted that the GOG is beginning to pay attention to the roads out of S-J, thanks to Georgia's Millennium Challenge Account. Manoyan said he believed the road would jump-start the region's revitalization, and that he hoped the next such project would be a joint Armenian-Georgian venture. Up until now, the roads' poor condition prevented S-J residents from selling goods in Tbilisi, a situation that exacerbated regional poverty in an area without industry, guaranteed electricity or viable infrastructure.

13. (C) Shirak Torosian, the S-J-born chairman of the Javakh Union of Compatriots and a member of the Armenian pro-government Powerful Fatherland party, was less measured in his criticism of the GOG. "Nobody wants to help," Torosian said. "It's political that infrastructure is not guaranteed for Javakheti." Torosian went further than Manoyan on the issue of autonomy, too. At first he said that he and his organization did not advocate autonomy for the region, but then noted that the oft-touted "self-determination" for S-J was really the same thing as

autonomy. He said he avoided the word "autonomy" in public because it tended to raise Georgian and Western ire.

14. (C) Anna Mnatsakanian from the Armenian Relief Society, a Dashnaktsutyun-affiliated social welfare organization that works in S-J, said she did not think the region's problems were worse than those of similarly poor areas elsewhere in Georgia. She thought the Saakashvili administration did pay attention to the region, but noted that infrastructure problems were severe. She said that in the winter of 2005, three children died of the flu because there was no ambulance service in their S-J village. S-J.

SHOULD SAMSTKHE-JAVAKHETI RESIDENTS STAY IN GEORGIA?

15. (C) Both Torosian and Manoyan were adamant that it is in Armenia's interest for S-J residents to stay put, if only to prevent others from moving in. Both raised the specter of Turkish atrocities past, and fretted over the idea that Meshkhetian Turks or ethnic Azeris might expand into the region if ethnic Armenians migrated south, which would put unfriendly faces at one of Armenia's two remaining friendly borders.

16. (C) Torosian said ethnically Armenian S-J residents are tied to Georgia only by virtue of employment. He said they consider themselves Armenian, and consider where they live to be somehow part of Armenia, but look to Tbilisi for opportunities to earn a living. That said, Torosian said their ties to Armenia are stronger and more compelling. For example, although the proposed Baku-Akhalkalaki-Kars railroad will help S-J economically, Torosian said the ethnic Armenians there did not support the project because it bypassed Armenia. (COMMENT: It's also possible that this is

YEREVAN 00001645 002 OF 002

just what Yerevantsi prefer to believe their kindred up north think. END COMMENT.) He said that although he would like the Armenians to stay in S-J, the Georgians were trying to force them out by refusing to help solve their problems.

17. (C) Manoyan said he encouraged reluctant S-J residents to learn Georgian so they could obtain an education and participate in politics. "I'm not sure they want to learn Georgian," Manoyan said, adding that the residents feared losing their Armenian identity because they knew the GOG tended to try to assimilate national minorities, rather than integrate them. He said the GOG should be understanding of the complexities of introducing Georgian as a state language in such an isolated and underdeveloped region.

GOAM STAYS OUT OF IT

18. (C) Though NGOs and individual political parties are concerned with the region's problems, the Armenian government is staying out of it. Vartan Hakobian, head of the MFA's CIS desk, told us that the government views S-J as a strictly domestic Georgian concern, not a bilateral issue.

19. (C) Earlier in the summer, a working group of NGOs and others met to discuss Armenia-Georgia issues, focusing in large part on S-J. After the meetings, Hranush Kharatian, head of the GOAM's national minorities department, told reporters at a press conference, "The result of discussion of problems accumulated in Javahk at the state level would be higher than at the level of experts and NGOs, but we have problems and they need to be discussed."

BUT THE PRESS DOES NOT

¶10. (U) Javakheti schools were a hot topic in the Armenian press this summer, and continue to make news into the fall. Newspapers have complained that ethnic Armenians have less chance of gaining admission to the Akhalkalaki branch of Tbilisi State University, because of their Georgian language deficiencies. Javakheti activist Torosian was featured in one article published in the Russian-language Regnum news service in June regarding the language battle. Torosian railed against the Georgian requirement that all classes, save Armenian language and Armenian history, be taught in Georgian. The author of the article succinctly described the Javakheti dilemma, writing, "Of course, he who does not want to sell potatoes in Javakh should learn Georgian to be able to integrate into Georgian society and to work in Georgian governmental structures."

COMMENT

¶11. (C) Barring any sudden crisis, Samstkhe-Javakheti seems unlikely to become a major political issue for the GOAM any time soon because the problem is not pressing, and boxed-in Armenia knows it must maintain working relations with its northern neighbor (and closest outlet to the sea). Though Armenian NGOs and political parties are concerned about the welfare of their compatriots in Georgia, their level of involvement in the region does not get far beyond a lot of talk, and a little welfare assistance. However, the S-J situation is among other, more pressing factors -- such as Georgia's friendly relations with Azerbaijan, and the fallout of its fracas with Russia -- that contribute to Armenians' general dissatisfaction with Georgia. It likely would not take all that much to arouse Armenian indignation on the subject should events turn sour.
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